

SOUNDINGS

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REEF REHAB IN THE ROUND

The world's reefs are in trouble. The reef ball team rolls to the rescue—and is having a ball doing it.

Appearing through the green dusk, it's a major archaeological find—onion-shaped Egyptian pots just a few shades shy of a full urn. No, wait, those are big skulls, vengeful gods seeking justice. A queen angelfish swims into one of the eyesockets and disappears. Boulders with holes? Wrong again. These hollow structures, furred with the small tufts that are the beginning of a coral reef, are Reef Balls. And they represent hope for one of the most endangered—and necessary—ecosystems on the planet: coral reefs.

In the good old days, only corals could build a

reef. And in the good old days, the biggest threats to those reefs were hurricanes, and perhaps the occasional disease harmful to coral polyps. These days, coral reefs face destruction on every front—fertilizer and pesticide

run-off, sedimentation caused by runoff from logging and farming, carelessly dropped boat anchors, and cyanide and dynamite fishing. But humans have also come along with some alternatives to waiting the centuries it takes nature to rebuild the reefs. There are now numerous human-made sinkables on which the little polyps can get a grip—from

outdated airplanes and repurposed freighters to leftover building rubble.

And Reef Balls to this list. The concrete Reef Balls—“artificial reef modules”—are cost-effective structures that are easy to build and easy to deploy, as well as safe for the environment.

Developed by a father and son team, Jerry and Todd Barber, Reef Balls were inspired by Hurricane Gilbert's destruction of their favorite reef off Grand Cayman. The Barbers lamented their loss. They didn't have hundreds of years to wait for the reef to rebuild itself, or the

thousands of dollars required for the barge and crane customarily employed in placing an artificial reef, but they did have a good deal of resourcefulness, imagination and the kind of dogged determination that has possessed generations of grass roots American inventors. It was Jerry, the senior Barber, who first came up with the idea.

“Why don't we just buy some big beach balls, coat them with concrete and roll them down the beach? Then we can tow them out where we want them and pop the beach balls.” The idea needed refinement, but Reef Balls were born.

DIVE TRAVEL

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